

# WNBA Finals: Las Vegas vs. Phoenix

Friday, October 3, 2025

**Cathy Engelbert**

Commissioner Press Conference



CATHY ENGELBERT: It's great to be here. Good evening, everyone. WNBA Finals ready to tip off, Game 1. It's our 29th WNBA Finals. Exciting night here in Las Vegas as the Aces prepare to take on the Phoenix Mercury, and the first-ever best-of-seven Finals series.

The Aces have been on a remarkable run, from winning 21 of their last 24 games to pulling off an incredible overtime victory in a decisive Game 5 just earlier this week. Their season definitely has been defined as resilience.

On the other side you have the Mercury, a team that has embodied toughness, togetherness and belief all year long to get here. I think WNBA fans everywhere can feel it. This has the makings of a Finals to remember. Congratulations to both teams.

I want to take a moment to address some important conversations happening across the WNBA, including remarks made earlier this week by Napheesa Collier. First, let me repeat this. You saw it in my statement, but I have the utmost respect for Napheesa and every single player in our league. They are at the center of everything we do. I was disheartened to hear that some players feel the league and me personally do not care about them or listen to them, and if the players in the W don't feel appreciated and valued by the league, then we have to do better and I have to do better.

We know how great these players are on and off the court, how much they mean to our league, our fans and our communities. If they don't feel that, I will do everything I can to change that. No one should ever doubt how deeply I care about this league, this game and every single player who makes the WNBA what it is.

We value feedback. We listen to criticism. We remain committed to engaging in the difficult but necessary conversations that ultimately make us all stronger and better.

As it relates to officiating and game play on the court, we hear the concerns. We take them seriously. Our game is faster, featuring more talent. The game is more

competitive than ever before. With that evolution, game rules and officiating has to keep pace.

Every major sport goes through this. Rules evolve, officiating adapts, standards shift alongside the growth of the game. The WNBA is no different.

At the conclusion of the season, as we do every year, the league's competition committee will meet to evaluate the state of the game, which includes game rules, officiating and player safety on the court. The Players Association and players as always are invited to engage.

Also, beyond that, we are establishing a multi-stakeholder task force, call it like a state-of-the-game committee, inviting player voices and other stakeholders to that table to ensure that our officiating platform evolves in step with the growth of the league. We'll have more details on that in the coming weeks.

Referees and their work serve the game. That service at the highest level requires alignment with its stakeholders to perform and be held accountable to that performance based on that alignment.

I think it's pretty clear that we're misaligned currently on what our stakeholders want from officiating. We have heard loud and clear that we have not lived up to that alignment and attention, and change is needed to serve the WNBA to the level of excellence that is not currently being met in the various stakeholders' eyes.

There are no greater stakeholders than our players. Their voice is integral to the alignment that is required for good officiating. We look forward to including their perspectives on how our staff can better serve the game moving forward.

Through the competition committee and the state-of-the-game committee I've mentioned, we will take a hard look at what the proper lines should be for good, aggressive play that we recognize has evolved into rough play, and how to calibrate the line for legal and illegal contact to ensure player safety and exciting competition.



We owe it to the players, our fans and the next generation to keep building a movement that not only showcases the best athletes in the world but also inspires millions who dream of following in their footsteps. That's the mission. That's the heart of the WNBA. And that's what unites us all -- players, coaches, fans and partners -- in pushing this game forward.

We all love this game immensely. Together we've made incredible progress. We've eclipsed previous records. We've expanded our footprint. We've bolstered the position of our league.

Since I know you will ask me about the CBA, I want to briefly cover this. We continue to meet and have important conversations with the Players Association. I want to reiterate that we want much of the same things that the players want. We want to significantly, and I mean significantly, increase their salary and benefits, while also supporting the long-term growth and viability of the WNBA.

We have made proposals to that end. We have been meeting regularly throughout the summer and Playoffs, and we will continue to negotiate in good faith until we get a transformative deal done.

In closing, these Finals mark the end of what has been a landmark season for the WNBA, a season defined not just by the remarkable play on the court but by the passion, the investment and the belief in what this league can become. There is still much work to do, and we welcome that work because the WNBA has always been about building something bigger than the game itself. We know the best way forward is together.

One last item, a big shout-out to my team. I am so blessed to be working with so many amazing colleagues at the league office. When I came in, we had very few people working in the W. Now we have hundreds working tirelessly on behalf of the league and the players, and thousands if you include the teams.

I have so much gratitude in times like this for how great our team is and how hard they work. They are the best in women's sports, for sure, and they have shined over the last couple years with their broad capabilities, innovative thinking, stellar execution and endless passion for doing their best for the players and this game.

With that, I'm happy to take your questions.

**Q. There's a lot to unpack in that statement.**

**Two-parter. One is the CBA deadline is the 31st of October. Are you expecting to be done by then or maybe have an extension? And the Connecticut Sun**

**sale, where does that stand of either having the team stay in Connecticut or go somewhere else?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: On the October 31st deadline, we're working really hard. We have a couple meetings next week. We had one this week. Working really hard to exchange proposals and make some progress. While I hope we make the October 31st deadline, and that is a real deadline from that perspective, we have extended deadlines in the past.

I know last time, when I was only a couple days on the job, we got to an extension and got a deal done that was progressive at the time. So again, I feel confident that we can get a deal done, but if not, I think we could do an extension. I don't think, hopefully -- the Players Association and we will continue to work hard between now and the end of the month.

On Connecticut, the Tribe continues to evaluate its strategic options as it relates to what they want to do as far as continuing as majority owners, selling minority investments, selling the entire team. We receive periodic updates from them. But there's no decision been made yet from their perspective on how they're strategically looking at their next steps.

**Q. I just wanted to get some clarity on some of the specifics that Napheesa Collier said about your conversation that you had that was previously private. Did you, in fact, say that "Players should be on their knees thanking their lucky stars for the rights deal that I got them?"**

CATHY ENGELBERT: There's a lot of inaccuracy out there through social media and all this reporting. So I think what's most helpful is to focus on -- I have been in touch with Napheesa. We've exchanged texts. We're talking next week.

I think obviously a lot of reporting, a lot of inaccuracy about what I said or what I didn't say. And I will tell you I highly respect the players. There's a lot of emotion and passion going on right now because we're in collective bargaining, we're in the WNBA Finals. So I'll leave it there.

I'm just obviously disheartened. I'm a human too. I have a family. I have two kids who are devastated by these comments. So all I'll say is just -- it's obviously been a tough week, and I just think there's a lot of inaccuracy out there.

**Q. I did want to follow up and ask, the growing sentiment around the league is that players, they feel that the right leadership isn't in place right now in the**



**league office. Do you feel that you're still the right voice and expect to continue to be commissioner beyond this CBA?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, certainly that's another inaccurate statement out there that everybody reads and takes clickbait on. Obviously, I've never been a quitter. I'm entering my 40th year, actually this month, in business. Never been a quitter. Never shied away from tough situations. I think leadership, the cream always rises to the top. I've always been someone who believes in the fact that we have -- if there's things we need to fix, we're going to fix them. If there's things the players have a perspective on that they don't like what we're doing or I'm doing, we'll fix them.

I think there's a point in time when obviously there's a lot of -- I said emotion, passion, whatever you want to call it, about what's going on right now. The league has grown enormously over the last five years. It's incredible what these players have done day in and day out, and they deserve all the credit.

But as I said, my staff and the staff of the teams and the owners in this league have made tons of investments to get to where we are today. And so I'm not going to shy away. I'm the commissioner of this league, the leader of this league. I think we've accomplished a lot, but we have a lot more hard work to do.

There's so many more things we can do together, and I hope that the players see that. I'm certainly looking forward to meeting with them in the offseason as we get to the next level, especially with so many great things that are going to happen in the offseason into next season.

**Q. Kind of still going on that same plane, you talked about you'll do anything you can to repair this relationship. What steps can you take, will you take, to try to repair the relationship with the players? Because obviously that's got to be something that you guys have to be partners in this whole thing.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think it starts with Napheesa and I. We'll sit down and chat. I've also communicated with a lot of other players this week, who have been great. Obviously, we've got the Finals going on here. We've got some announcements about some end-of-season awards coming up as well. So I've been talking to players who are on those lists. The players have been great overall, I think. I feel confident that we can repair any loss of trust.

I think, again, as we sit here in heavy bargaining discussions, I think, again, we want everything that the

players want from the perspective of significant, significant increases in salaries and benefits. I hope all the players will engage and know what proposals we've put on the table. I think now is the time to do that as we get up to the end of the season and then into the end of this calendar year.

So yeah, we'll dialogue with players. One-on-one relationships, groups of relationships. Players have reached out to me. Obviously, so have a lot of people in the basketball ecosystem about all the momentum we have and how important it is to continue that momentum. I think together we need to move forward.

Appreciate the question.

**Q. A trend we've seen this season has been the increase in injuries. According to The IX basketball database of injuries, injuries were up 36 percent this year, and even in the WNBA's own numbers that were shared with Bloomberg, they say they were up 29 percent. Amid change to officiating and what could come of that, I guess, what is the league prepared to do to address this increase in injuries going forward?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's an excellent question. Obviously, injuries are the worst part of sports, in my view, especially injuries that occur due to the physicality. I think our game is bigger, faster, stronger certainly even in the last five years since I've come into the league.

I think the training, the development, the strength and conditioning, the nutrition, everything that's going into the level of the play that a lot of our fans like is also adding to that physicality.

That's why I said in my prepared remarks we have to determine where the players want that line to be because obviously they want some of that, but obviously we don't want injuries. Unfortunately, you see in other sports that injuries are part of that. We have use of technology and wearables and things that can help determine research around injuries and when they're happening. Some of these non-contact injuries as well, more evaluation and research as it relates to that.

Yes, we'll be studying a lot of that as we go into using our experts and our physicians, our sports medicine doctors, things like that, to determine what's the best path forward. But I think ultimately it's going to come back to working with the players as to what that line is that we talked about on the physicality of the game. Because while some of the injuries were non-contact, some of them are through the physicality of the game.



So I think that's something we're obviously going to study, look at the data and see everything we can do to help with the player safety aspect of that.

**Q. Two questions: One point of clarification, is the meeting with Phee in person or is it a virtual meeting?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: We haven't determined yet. I just said let me get through the beginning of the Finals and we'll talk next week.

**Q. What role is Adam Silver playing in the CBA negotiation?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Again, Adam has been a great supporter of mine through -- he was the one who had the idea to have a commissioner reporting to the Board of Governors, the owners. Of course, I give him updates periodically, but he's not in the bargaining room. It's me and my team and our negotiators and our lawyers and their lawyers and their staff at the PA, and then sometimes players, sometimes not in the meetings.

I give Adam periodic updates. He's been very supportive of how we're thinking about the substantial increase in player salaries and benefits.

By the way, there's 30 other things that's part of the CBA. But I realize the No. 1 thing the players are focused on, which is why I have been listening, is increases in salaries and benefits.

**Q. I was just wondering, do you have any updates with the expansion drafts or the two new teams coming in '26?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, so obviously we need to get a collective bargaining agreement done before we will probably have those expansion drafts, as well as the draft lottery. So those are the two things we usually do before the calendar year end, leading into the free agency and ultimately the draft in the spring.

We have given our general managers some guidance on how we're thinking, but until we get the collective bargaining agreement done, it won't be finalized as to the format or process. But you can expect, because you saw what we did last year, something similar.

**Q. You talked about evaluating officiating at the end of the season. We have seven games in front of us. What, if any, conversation have you had with the supervisor of officials and the officials who will officiate these games about what we should expect in the next seven potential games?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, we've had a lot of conversations over toward the end of the regular season into the first and second rounds of the Playoffs already, the semifinals with our officiating staff, the leadership, to talk through exactly the evaluation, the accountability.

Again, everybody has their opinion on officiating in every sport. I know I have five brothers. They have lots of opinions on officiating in every sport that I've been hearing since I was a little girl.

But yeah, certainly something we're talking about. Obviously, the officials are evaluated every -- I didn't know this until I came into sports, every non-call and call is evaluated for every game during the season. This isn't something like we blow off. They're evaluating every call and non-call. So think about that: That's every play in every game, film is reviewed. There's training, there's officiating, there's points of emphasis, obviously.

So we continue to have those discussions with officiating crews even here into the Finals.

**Q. When it comes to CBA negotiations, what would you say specifically are the things that the players are asking for right now? We've heard, like you said, their priorities are salary structure, rev share. That the owners feel like they're not seeing eye to eye on or they can't right now say yes to?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think it's all about balancing the significant increase in salaries and benefits with the long-term viability of the league. We've made proposals with significant rev share components already in the money, rev share components as I reported I guess it was at All-Star. They're obviously bargaining for more. So we're just trying to obviously balance looking out many years, because CBAs are typically several years long, whether it's eight years, six years, whatever you want to call it. So looking out to make sure -- I think the players want this, too, that the next generation of players that come after them have a viable league to play in.

That's what we're just kind of going back and forth determining where that right balance is. I think we all agree we're trying to return every dollar we possibly can to the players, but we also want to incentivize investment from owners. We want owners to have a viable business. Obviously, we're looking at expansion up to 18 teams by the end of the decade. So that's important that those owners coming in have a shot at a viable economic model for the future.

That's the balance. The balance is between -- I would

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®



return every single dollar we possibly can, and we will. But balancing that with making sure our owners are incentivized to continuing their investment.

You already saw what L.A. announced on their practice facility. Obviously, we have lots of other player experience investments going on by many of our owners. We want to continue to have that incentivized because that actually has helped player health and safety, including the charter program, et cetera. So it's memorializing that, too, and making sure that we're providing the best environment for players and that our owners continue to invest.

**Q. You've continued to express that you're disheartened by the characterization of your conversation with Napheesa Collier. Just again seeking clarity, did you, in fact, say that Caitlin Clark should be grateful she makes \$16 million off the court because without the platform that the WNBA gives her, she wouldn't make anything? And do you actually feel that way, that without this platform, players like Caitlin Clark wouldn't be making what they do off the court?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Obviously, I did not make those comments. Caitlin has been a transformational player in this league. She's been a great representative of the game. She's brought in tens of millions of new fans to the game. I'm proud of what she's put on the court. Unfortunately, the injury has held her back from a full season this year.

But again, I'm not going to get into every point, counterpoint. It's not productive here. We're here to celebrate the WNBA Finals.

I think what Indiana just did was amazing with all the injuries they had and all they faced this year, bringing that to a Game 5 in overtime.

But yeah, as I said, there's a lot of inaccuracies reported out there, and I certainly did not say that.

**Q. Obviously if the CBA doesn't get done, there's a potential lockout that could happen. How does the W plan to continue to manage the growth the league has experienced from a marketing standpoint, from a storytelling standpoint, while potentially handling a lockout?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's an excellent question. Whether it's a lockout, strike, there's deadlines, there's extensions that could be done. All I'll say is it's a very good question because you want to make sure you're capitalizing on all this momentum that we've built up over the last five years or so, and that is really driving

viewership into our game and fandom.

We did this LineEmUp initiative this year where we painted the WNBA three-point line on inner-city courts around the country. To see the young girls be able to see role models like the WNBA players, and to attract them to the game and to let them stay in sports, this is all the important stuff of why we need to get this transformational CBA done as soon as we can, because that's where you see the potential for the future of this game.

So yeah, it's a balancing act. Again, I feel confident we are going to get a deal done. But obviously we have a ways to go, and we'll work as hard as we can around the clock. Terri Jackson and I have talked about working as hard as we can, like we did last time. We did extend it a few months last time to get it done by January. So we've been here before.

We have a lot of experience in these negotiations, even well before I got here, but now this one. So again, yes, it's a balance. We want to make sure there's no interruption, but obviously that'll be up to the players and our owners.

But I think we're on a path to get, I think, what will be a very good deal and fair deal for all done.

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